

EMPLOYER'S GUIDE

A brief guide for employers working with individuals with **Autism Spectrum Disorders**



What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are conditions that affect how a person interacts with other people, experiences the world and processes information.

ASDs are **pervasive developmental disorders**, meaning that they impact every area of a person's life from early childhood onwards. The **spectrum** in ASD means that their difficulties can range from barely noticeable differences to severe limitations. The vocational needs of people with ASDs depend on the individual and the degree of their abilities.

All people with an ASD have varying levels of challenges in these areas:

Social Communication

Language

- Having eccentric or limited language abilities
- Interpreting language in a literal way
- Using formal or stilted language
- Struggling with using language socially and the dynamics of conversation

Nonverbal Communication

- Not noticing or personally using gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- Not recognizing others emotions, preferences, motivations or expectations
- Not noticing other people's signs of boredom, or irritation in conversation
- Unawareness of unspoken rules of behaviour such as rules of personal space
- Difficulty establishing or maintaining eye contact
- Difficulty developing or maintaining friendships

Imagination

- Having trouble with seeing the bigger picture, and abstract thinking
- Difficulty with flexibility in thinking, which affects ability to organize and plan ahead
- Feeling more comfortable with concrete facts than hypothetical situations
- Difficulty understanding other people's perspectives or points of view

Other Common Features

- May have sensitivity to certain noises, smells, tastes or textures
- May sometimes exhibit repetitive motor behaviours such as pacing or arm flapping
- May experience anxiety if a routine, schedule or prescribed procedure is not followed
- May have special areas of interest that occupy a lot of their time and about which they remember large amounts of information

Strengths

People with ASDs can be effective and highly valued employees who can offer employers unique strengths that can benefit their organization



Exceptional concentration: People with ASDs can persist and focus on detailed work. They often find opportunities to concentrate on work for extended periods of time rewarding.

Attention to detail: In addition to concentration, people with ASDs are very attuned to detail, and are often commended for their accuracy.

Problem-solving skills: People with ASDs tend to be very logical, visual and structured thinkers and often enjoy the challenge of problem solving.

Intelligence and aptitude: Many people with ASDs, particularly those with *Asperger Syndrome* or *High-Functioning Autism* – have average to above average intelligence levels.

Specialized interests and skills: People with ASDs often develop specific areas of interest or skills.

Good memory: Their interest in certain areas often comes with an extensive knowledge of details, figures and facts about that area.

Reliability: People with ASDs are very conscious of rules and employers often value their punctuality, low-absenteeism, honesty and trustworthiness.

Retention: People with ASDs thrive in a work environment that is structured, has routine and predictability. This often leads people with ASDs to stay in one role for significantly longer than other employees.

Repetition: People with ASDs often enjoy repetitive tasks, and may appreciate tasks shunned by others due to their social isolation and repetitive nature.

Bringing out these strengths and allowing a person with an ASD to succeed depends on both employers and co-workers creating a supportive environment in the workplace.

This manual offers some strategies that can help individuals across the spectrum.

Recruitment

The recruitment process may pose unnecessary challenges for people with ASDs. Some minor adjustments can help both applicants with and without ASDs by increasing overall efficiency in the process.

The Job Description

Job descriptions should be made concise by listing essential skills, excluding jargon and unnecessary information. Skills that are often included as default requirements such as “excellent communication and interpersonal skills”, or “good team player” should only be listed if they are essential for the work to be completed effectively. These could unnecessarily discourage many people with ASDs from applying.

The Right Match

As with all employees, **ensuring a good match** between the job and the strengths, education and interests of the person with an ASD is key to their success. In addition to capitalizing on their individual profile, **appropriate jobs are predictable, have clearly defined tasks and a regular schedule.** Some individuals may work better in areas with minimal visual and auditory distractions.

The Interview

Interviews are highly dependent on social and communication skills, and the valuable skills of people with ASDs are often overlooked as a result.

In particular, they may struggle with:

- Demonstrating enthusiasm for the role or “selling themselves” as exceptional candidates
- Reading body language, and making eye contact
- Making small talk
- Initiating and maintaining conversations, and shifting topics when appropriate

- Understanding the amount or type of answer the interviewer is looking for
- Thinking in the abstract, and answering hypothetical “What if?” questions

Here are some things employers can do to facilitate this process for the candidate and find out if they are well suited to the job.

Before the Interview

- Find out the candidate’s preferred method of communication.
 - Verbal, sign language, picture exchange system, communication device, etc.
- Provide the candidate a written description of what will be expected of them at the interview, what they need to bring along with them and directions on how to get to the interview.
- Let them know the questions, their sequence and content they should expect
- Give the person a schedule or outline for the interview both in advance and at the interview. Include the estimated time and try to adhere to this schedule.

Consider alternatives to a standard interview:

- **A walking interview** may be a better way of asking an individual whether they will be able to work in this environment, than asking hypothetical questions (ex. Taking a tour of the concession stand and asking if it would be an appropriate environment rather than asking the candidate “Could you work at our concession stand?” in an office).
- While a **work trial** may decrease the demand on the candidate’s social and communication abilities, keep in mind that it will likely underestimate the person’s abilities as people with ASDs take time to adjust to new tasks and routines. However, for some individuals with ASD the trial may be the best way to assess suitability for the job.
- **If a supporter** accompanies the candidate, they can facilitate communication by helping the interviewer ask the right questions, clarifying any questions that may be unclear, and helping the candidate understand what type of answer the interviewer is looking for.



During the interview

- If possible, the interview room should have minimal distractions including
 - Indirect, soft, non-fluorescent lighting
 - Few distracting background sounds and activities
 - Minimal clutter
 - Ample space to walk between furniture
- Use close-ended questions such as “Tell me three of your responsibilities at your last job” rather than “Tell me about your last job”
- Avoid hypothetical questions such as “How do you handle stress?” Instead, say “Tell me about something in your last job that stressed you out. What did you do to reduce your stress?”
- Speak literally, and do not use expressions or sayings such as ‘draw a connection’ or ‘ballpark figure’.
- Allow for long pauses for the candidates to process your question and think about their answers. Let them set the pace of the interview.
- If the candidate is talking too much, you could say “Thank you, you’ve told us enough about that now, and I would like to ask you another question.”
- Understand that the person may not make eye contact, may exhibit repetitive motor behaviours or repeat phrases back to you.
- Do not interpret flat facial expression as disinterest in the process or job.

In Training

Clarify job expectations

- Teach systematically and allow for ample practice.
- Break important tasks into smaller, sequential steps (e.g., sign in at the desk, say hello to your supervisor, get your key from the hook, etc.)
- Give alternative solutions (e.g., if you don't immediately see your supervisor, get your key from the hook and say hello when you do see them).
- Point out details recognizing that while they may seem obvious to you, it may not be obvious to them (e.g., if you are leading a customer to a certain area, make sure they are following you).
- Outline the specific expected outcome
- Write down directions sequentially to provide a go-to reference and prevent interruptions of co-workers with questions.
- Assemble a binder of task-relevant information to help the person become a more independent worker.
- Outline the dress code.
- Be clear about behavioural expectations and what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Establish routines

People with ASDs work best with routines and predictability.

- Use structured routines, and consistent daily schedules.
- Provide advance notice of changes in routines or schedules.
- Include expected timelines for completion of projects.
- Consider an introduction to the routine at the outset of training rather than a day or two of paperwork and orientation as this can cause confusion.
- If small talk is required, suggest "safe topics" (e.g., weather, a current event in the city).

Use scripts for certain situations

Offering scripts for re-occurring situations (e.g., talking to customers at the cash register, calling in sick, etc.)

Use visuals for instruction and organization

Most people with ASDs process information visually.

- Using visual aids in all parts of training and everyday work capitalizes on this strength. It also helps compensate for any difficulties with short-term memory.
 - Specific written instructions, schedules, calendars, labels, colour-coded folders, and graphic organizers.

Minimize tasks requiring multi-tasking

The excellent concentration abilities of people with ASDs often results in difficulty with tasks that require fast-paced judgements and switching between demands.

Use rewards and reinforcement

Some people with ASDs may need frequent feedback and rewards to help motivate their performance.

- A paycheck may be sufficient for some people, but for others the delay between their performance and receiving a paycheck may be too long to understand the connection.
- Using rewards such as verbal praise, allowing the person to play a video game or buy a favourite snack while on break, can support the training process.

Consider a job coach

Many individuals with an ASD are going to be accompanied by a job coach. It would be worthwhile for employers to allow them to work alongside the employee. Job coaches can help a workplace and co-workers accommodate the employee's needs to help transition them into independence.

- In addition to ensuring that the employee understands their job tasks and rules of the workplace, they can create an accommodating space, and alert co-workers to behavioural cues and how to help the employee. For example, rather than intervening if the employee appears anxious, the job coach can help co-workers notice the employee's signs of distress and allow them to help the employee. This prevents the job coach from becoming a crutch for the employee with an ASD.

In the Workplace

Avoid misunderstandings by increasing awareness among co-workers

ASDs are 'invisible' conditions. Taking steps to understand a person's ASD and educating their co-workers can help them manage the social aspects of the workplace.

- Develop an introductory page, or have the individual give a presentation for co-workers they frequently interact with. Use this to introduce the employee and highlight specific ways they think co-workers can help them feel comfortable in the workplace (e.g., I have difficulty understanding sarcasm; my repetitive movements may be a sign that I am overwhelmed). Make sure the individual is comfortable disclosing this to their co-workers in advance.
- If the person with an ASD responds in a way that seems inappropriate or unfeeling, help co-workers remember that it is not deliberate and likely due to their communication difficulties. Ask questions to clarify the person's original intentions. Be gentle, but direct and specific. Outline what is inappropriate and what behaviour is expected instead if a similar situation occurs in the future. (e.g., When you said, "That stinks," it was considered rude. You should move yourself away from the smell if it bothers you and not say anything instead.)
- If the person does not laugh at jokes or join into social conversation, this does not necessarily mean they don't have a sense of humour. Their literal interpretation of language may make it difficult for them to understand humour and sarcasm.
- This literal interpretation of language may cause a person with an ASD to understand casual agreements as firm promises, or interpreting "rules of thumb" as firm regulations. When others fail to follow through with these agreements, or don't abide by rules, the person with an ASD may feel betrayed, decide that other people are untrustworthy or attempt to "police" the rules themselves. These reactions can fuel misunderstanding and co-workers and supervisors should keep this in mind when speaking to the person with an ASD.
- The communication difficulties associated with ASDs may not always receive compassion from co-workers and may lead to vulnerability for harassment and exploitation. People with ASDs may be honest and kind, but fail to take the feelings of others into consideration when making criticisms, or correcting others. They may need explanations of the rules of communicating with superiors, subordinates, customers, and co-workers.



In the Workplace

Regularly review performance

- Frequent, brief review sessions may be preferable to typical feedback schedules
- Whenever possible, give feedback in the moment.
- Take these opportunities to give constructive comments and sensitive, but direct, honest, and consistent feedback.
- When necessary, explain why a task is wrong and clearly lay out what should be done instead as the individual may struggle to understand implied suggestions.
- Give positive comments wherever appropriate.
- Minimize the number of supervisors if possible
- Those with ASDs often fail to filter their speech and come across as too direct while supervisors are often not direct enough.

Minimize sensory distractions

- Create a workspace in a quiet area and turn down volume on devices such as phone ringers.
- Consider using small fans, or white-noise machines and allow for use of ear plugs or headphones to help reduce auditory distractions.
- Minimize visual distractions by removing clutter and avoiding areas where people can be seen moving around.
- Have a clearly defined work space.
- Use incandescent light bulbs instead of fluorescent lights.
- Use computer monitors that have minimal flickering.
- Allow employees with ASDs to take breaks independently or to take leave a minute before their co-workers. This can prevent them being overwhelmed by the large group.
- If the work environment does not allow for such modifications (e.g., retail, food services) ask the individual directly whether they would be able to work in the space (e.g., Would the heat from the popcorn machine bother you or prevent you from doing the job?).

Designate a workplace mentor

Assigning an empathetic colleague as a “workplace mentor” who can answer questions, or provide moral support in times of stress can help address problems before they escalate. People with ASDs often do not naturally form a network of alliances and mentors in their

workplace, and may benefit from a formalized support network.

- Ask around the workplace: is there someone who is familiar with autism through personal experience or knowledge and may want to volunteer their help?

Address any anxieties

People with ASDs can become anxious if their work is not perfect, if they are overwhelmed, or do not know how to proceed in a situation.

- Find out the root of the problem in a one-on-one conversation.
- Offer concrete solutions to the problem, for example “If he is not in his office when you arrive, leave the file in his mailbox”.
- Reassure them about reasonable margins of error. Unpreventable factors that occasionally prevent them from fulfilling responsibilities such as arriving on time, are okay.

Deal with problems that may arise

If problems arise in the workplace

- Do not interpret the person’s behaviour as rude or uncooperative.
- Note that an increase in unusual behaviours may indicate that the person is feeling stressed or anxious about a certain situation.
- Talk with the individual or their job coach to figure out how to help them handle stress ahead of time. The person may feel better after talking with someone or spending some time alone in a designated quiet space.
- The supervisor, job coach or mentor can help by clarifying the root of the problem with the person before making any potential adjustments.

Assign appropriate job positions

- Allow the employee to work independently as much as possible.
- Evaluate their supervisory skills as well as their task skills before considering a change or assigning a managerial or supervisory position.
- The uneven skill profile of people with ASDs makes it challenging to identify appropriate jobs.
- Do not expect skills to spontaneously transfer across settings, tasks or supervisors.

Reference
Guide and
Some More
Resources
that can help

Autism Society of Minnesota. *Working with People who have High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome: Tools and Strategies for Managers and Supervisors.*

Forward Motion Coaching <http://www.forwardmotion.info/>
Email: Barbara@forwardmotion.info

Prospects employment support – the National Autistic Society
<http://www.autism.org.uk/prospects/>

Dr. Scott Standifer, author of *Adult Autism & Employment: A guide for vocational rehabilitation professionals*

Hendricks, D. (2010). Employment and adults with autism spectrum disorders: Challenges and strategies for success. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 32*, 125-134.

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